

# How Diversity Affects Teaching and Learning

## Climate of inclusion has a positive effect on learning outcomes.

by Sylvia Hurtado

Colleges and universities that have adopted a proactive commitment to student diversity have done so because they understand how their central mission is linked with the future of a diverse society. They are aware that, by the year 2000, most new jobs in the economy will require a postsecondary education, and women and racial/ethnic minorities will compose a majority of the workforce. One result of this awareness is a transformation taking place at many institutions that links diversity in the student body with the development of new teaching and learning practices.

Changes to higher education practices and curricula began nearly 30 years ago, when institutions first opened their doors to groups that previously had been excluded from higher education. When the "experiment" began, many campuses were not prepared for the changes they would undergo as a result of including more adult students, women, and racial/ethnic minorities in their student bodies. These changes in student enrollments were connected with major intellectual and social movements that raised important questions about the production and transmission of knowledge, as well as access to education. Diverse student enrollments resulted in pressures that led to the development of new academic support programs and student organizations, diversification of faculty and staff, the establishment of ethnic and women's studies programs, and the revision of educational policies and curricula to reflect the diversity of human experience and perspectives. Because these issues often required fundamental

changes in premises and practices at many levels, few of these changes occurred without institutional or individual resistance, and many institutions continue to confront conflicts over diversity issues today.

Undoubtedly, increasingly diverse student enrollments have presented challenges on campus and in the classroom. However, many of these challenges are at the core of institutional improvements that enhance student learning and involve faculty development. For example, the emergence of research on diverse learning styles can be attributed in part to increased diversity in the classroom. The research suggests that no single instructional method may be effective in the multicultural classroom<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, institutions interested in improving student learning outcomes are devoting greater attention to helping faculty and teaching assistants develop a repertoire of instructional methods that foster respect for cultural differences and address variant learning styles.

Other examples of how student diversity is linked with the teaching and learning mission of higher education abound. Goals for enhancing student learning and development remain uppermost in the minds of administrators and faculty as they seek ways to reaffirm their commitment to diversity and the improvement of undergraduate education. Some of the most exciting developments address difficult educational and social problems. These developments include the following:

-- Through reforms in undergraduate teaching of science and mathematics, institutions are developing ways to increase the scientific and quantitative literacy of undergraduates who begin college with broad differences in ability<sup>2</sup>. This represents a major shift in thinking about who can acquire skills for success in an increasingly technological society. Instead of "weeding out" less-prepared students, these reforms begin with the clear goal of providing access to science, mathematics, engineering and technology to all students.

--Recognizing that the key to parity in educational attainment lies at various points in the educational pipeline, higher education institutions are collaborating with K-12 institutions and community-based organizations to develop a comprehensive approach toward education in low income and racially diverse areas of the country. Initiatives involve links across sectors in efforts to strategically improve degree progress.

--Scholars are engaged in conversation with institutions about developing models for new cognitive outcomes that reflect students' abilities to comprehend multiple perspectives on an issue and ultimately arrive at decisions that are just and equitable<sup>3</sup>. Campuses also are exploring ways to assist students in learning conflict management and human relations skills for better cross-cultural interaction.

--While some conflict inevitably occurs in diverse communities, research shows that students tend to perceive relatively lower racial

or ethnic tension on campuses that can be characterized as "student-centered," where faculty take an interest in the students' personal and academic development. More importantly, research indicates that emphasizing diversity on college campuses tends to have consistently positive effects on students' undergraduate experiences and on their educational outcomes<sup>4</sup>. These findings indicate that valuing students as learners creates a more harmonious campus community, and that an emphasis on diversity in the curriculum and in institutional priorities often leads to improvements in the learning environment for students.

These examples illustrate how key transformations in the teaching and learning activity of institutions are linked with understanding and serving a diverse student body. Each requires major changes in our thinking about institutional practices that, while effective with a more homogeneous population, may no longer be useful today. However, at the same time that institutions and individuals are engaged in conversations about the future and their role in educating a diverse citizenry, practices to promote diverse student enrollments are being called into question. This seemingly contradictory state is not inconsistent with our history on diversity issues. Both resistance and change are inevitable parts of the major transformation that is underway in the mission of postsecondary institutions—a mission that includes diversity as a key component.

### Footnotes:

1. Irvine, J.J. and D.E. York. Learning Styles and Culturally Diverse Students: A Literature Review, in Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education, edited by J.A. Banks and C.A. McGee Banks. New York; Macmillan, 1995.
  2. National Research Council. From Analysis to Action: Undergraduate Education in Science, Mathematics, Engineering, and Technology. Report of a Convocation. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1996.
  3. Minnich, E.K. Liberal Learning and the Arts of Connection for the New Academy. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1995.
  4. Appel, M., D. Cartright, S.G. Smith, and L.E. Wolf. The Impact of Diversity on Students: A Preliminary View of the Research Literature. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1996.
- Also: Hurtado, S., J.F. Milem, W.A. Allen, and A. Clayton-Pederson. Improving the Climate for Racial/Ethnic Diversity in Higher Education Institutions. Final Report to the Lily Foundation, Common Destiny Alliance, Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1996.